

To the extreme

by EARL F. PALMER

"MEN (AND WOMEN) never delight in doing evil as much as if they can do it for religious reasons." It was Pascal who uttered this chilling thought. Pascal saw the harmful extremism, both verbal and physical, that happened around him by which cruel people persecuted other people while they viewed their own acts as the advancement of a righteous goal. But evil acts are evil acts, and it is for our benefit that in the 16th century, Blaise Pascal, challenged the unrighteousness that wears a religious mask. He saw that men and women need to be healed from the ways we do this kind of harm.

But is there a cure? G.K. Chesterton described one cure when he said that the "best safeguard against bad literature is a full experience of good literature." I believe that this "cure" is one answer to four kinds of present-day extremism: political, religious, personal and tribal. Extremism is, by nature, narrow and tightly focused so that, with only a few favored inputs, it makes up its own arguments and supporting logic to justify hostility, and therefore is able to disregard other reasoning that counsels moderation, restraint and civility. But it is that limited selection of reasons that is exactly the problem. There are too few inputs! Therefore, the cure begins to happen when the good and the better sources of truth, grace and logic can get past the severe filters that manage the access to that part of our brain where we make up our minds about what is right and wrong. Following this, there is need for each of us to find healthy relationships with those who are able to help free us from ourselves and the extreme edges that tempt us.

One of the many reasons that I trust Jesus Christ is that he is that kind of person. He gives to us the mixture of faithfulness to truth and the generosity of love that is able to heal the anger we feel toward the ones we think of as our enemies or outsiders. The Law and the Gospel are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and he creates in ordinary men and women the source of grace to live by and for. That living grace becomes the cure for fierceness toward others and toward myself too.

WHEN OTHERS SEE IN OUR BEHAVIOR A LOVE AND HUMILITY THAT COMES FROM THE GOSPEL, THEY ARE "QUIETED LONG ENOUGH TO WANT TO LEARN THE SOURCE OF HOPE."

This is a strategy of person-to-person presence that brings peace in the complicated, disparate places where people have lost hope. Added to this there is a moderation that becomes one of the essential marks of Christian ambassadorship and strategy for change. Paul put it this way: "Let all people see your moderation, the Lord is nearby." (Phil. 4:5) What Paul is describing is a person who recognizes his or her own uneven story; therefore, knowing this about myself, I am more willing to accept restraints on hasty over-reaction to various dangers that I see around me. In Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5), one of those good fruits is "self-control," a godly grip on myself (egogratia is the word Paul uses). "Extremism is perhaps the easiest way to lose that grip, because it tricks me into thinking I am working for 'the cause' while that very cause is the thing that is getting a grip on me."

When these around us see in our behavior a down-to-earth love for people and humility that comes from the Gospel, they are themselves sooner or later quieted long enough to want to learn the source of hope. Jesus said it too. "Come unto me all ye who labor and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... " (Matthew 11:28-29). All of this is possible because the Lord is nearby.

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